



Region 4 State Parks  
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**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE  
FOR THE  
HOST PAD IMPROVEMENT PROJECT AT  
CAMP BAKER – SMITH RIVER STATE PARK**

**November 06, 2014**

**Description of Proposed Action:** During the peak float season of April through July, as many as 100 floaters per day launch watercraft at Camp Baker. Most visitors camp overnight before beginning their float the next day. In order to better serve the needs of floaters, improve site security, and assist the Park Rangers, MSP proposes to develop a host site at Camp Baker to accommodate a seasonal volunteer host. The proposed project would include: construction of a gravel pad approximately 35 feet by 12 feet for RV parking; construction of a graveled area adjacent to the RV pad with fire ring and picnic table; installation of buried water, electrical and phone lines from the existing staff house to the host site; installation of one underground 2000 gallon septic holding tank; and extension of the existing driveway to the RV pad (Figures 3 and 4 in environmental assessment).

Providing the basic amenities of a stable and level parking pad as well as convenient and reliable electricity, water, sewer and phone would greatly enhance the ability to attract and maintain quality volunteer hosts for the long-term. This would ensure a high quality experience for floaters as well as non-floating visitors.

**Public Process and Comments:** A draft Environmental Assessment proposing this action was posted on September 15, 2014 in the Public Notices section of the Montana State Parks website. Legal notices were published twice each in the *Great Falls Tribune* and *Helena Independent Record*. Public comments were taken for 30 days through October 15, 2014.

Three (3) public comments were received.

**Supportive (2):** Two comments were received in general overall support of the project. These comments did not address specific impacts to the physical or human environments that were evaluated within the Environmental Assessment (EA).

**Oppose (1):** One comment was received in opposition to the project. However, this comment did not specifically address impacts to the physical or human environments that were evaluated within the Environmental Assessment (EA). The comment did list three main reasons why he was opposed to the proposed improvements. Those reasons and the responses are listed and addressed below:

Response

Camp Baker is the launch site for floaters entering Smith River State Park & River Corridor. It is managed by Montana State Parks, a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, as a unit of Smith River State Park. Smith River State Park is part of a system of state parks. Funding that supports Smith River State Park operations comes primarily from state park user fees, including Smith River float fees for private and commercial use, and light vehicle registrations. Additional funding support comes from federal contracts and grants and retail sales of firewood, camping and other items sold at Eden Bridge and Camp Baker.

The proposed host pad project involves developing a graveled host pad, graveled living area for a picnic table and fire ring, installation of a utility pedestal providing electrical power, water and phone via buried lines, installation of one buried septic holding tank and extension of the existing driveway leading to the host pad. This development would occur within a previously impacted area (old cabin location).

It's important to emphasize that Camp Baker is the launch site for floaters entering Smith River State Park & River Corridor preparing for a multi-day river trip, not simply conducting a day use float. This requires an array of logistical planning and preparation, especially for large groups and/or groups involving members traveling great distances from different parts of Montana or the country. Providing floaters the opportunity to camp overnight at Camp Baker allows them the ability to stage their boats and equipment. It gives them the time, ease, and comfort of being able to unload and rig up boats, organize gear and equipment, quiz the river rangers, and relax the evening before their launch, rather than attempting to complete all these tasks the morning of their launch. This equates into a much smoother and organized registration and launch process for the public and parks staff alike.

Hosts at Camp Baker would provide a variety of important services to floaters of Smith River State Park. In addition, they would be available to assist the river rangers with completing tasks at Camp Baker, in turn, helping to reduce the rangers' accrual of comp-time. These benefits are listed on page 4 of the environmental assessment and are explained in additional detail below:

- Site security for 60 plus vehicles and trailers at a given time: Vehicles at Camp Baker are parked on-site for 3-5 days at a time. They can be more susceptible to break-ins and theft during this period. The river rangers often have to drive into White Sulphur Springs to make bank deposits, purchase groceries and other supplies etc. thus, leaving Camp Baker unattended. Having a set of hosts at Camp Baker will not only help ensure the security of floater's property but also the security of park facilities and equipment.

- Assisting floaters entering the river: This will include disseminating timely safety information, answering questions both in person and via phone calls, selling last minute enterprise items (bear spray, electric fence, sun screen etc.) and last minute shuttle arrangements.
- Assisting rangers with registration of floaters and collection of floater fees: Hosts will be available to assist the rangers during the busy, peak use periods with a variety of tasks related to registration, including filling out registration forms, issuing float logs and boat tags, counting money and preparing bank deposits.
- Site maintenance (cleaning/stocking vault latrines, grass mowing, tree trimming, weed control, litter patrol, recycling, etc.): Hosts will perform several grounds and facility maintenance tasks that the rangers often do not have time at the end of the day to complete, including maintenance of water craft and other river patrol equipment. This will ensure clean and safe facilities for the public, as well as parks staff, while also reducing the rangers' accrual of comp-time.
- Safety and orientation instruction for floaters: Hosts will be available to assist with the safety and orientation talk presented to all float groups prior to launching. This is especially important with regards to disseminating "Be Bear Aware" and food storage education as well as demonstrating the proper use of bear spray.
- Traffic and parking control: Camp Baker experiences a high volume of vehicular traffic from early in the morning extending into the late evening. Parking space at Camp Baker is very limited so it's very important that floater's park their vehicles and trailers in an efficient and orderly manner. The hosts can assist floaters with parking vehicles and maximizing space, while the rangers focus on registration and other administrative tasks.
- Information sharing with parks staff (incidents, wildlife encounters, hazards etc.): The hosts will be available to staff the ranger station while the rangers are outside registering floaters, thus answering the phone and returning phone calls. This will include relaying timely information to other parks staff including the Eden Bridge hosts and the Park Manager.
- Maintaining the lost and found program: Floaters frequently leave personal items lying in the launch area or camping area at Camp Baker. The hosts will assist with cataloging these items and relay this information to the hosts at Eden Bridge with the goal of tracking down the rightful owners.
- Managing Enterprise merchandise (selling Smith River T-Shirts and future merchandise): Camp Baker currently sells a variety of items at Camp Baker. This includes fire wood and important safety products including bear spray and portable electric fences. Other items stocked include comfort/safety products that floaters may have forgotten to pack including insect repellent, sun screen, lip balm, ball caps and wool-blend beanie caps. While the rangers are busy registering floaters, the hosts will be available to sell these items to the public and also assist with managing the inventory. The revenue generated from the sale of these items revolves back into the Smith River Enterprise Account which supports restocking of new items at both Eden Bridge and Camp Baker.

Revenue generated from the sale of Enterprise Account items is also converted into FTE to help fund the river rangers who manage the sales and inventory at Camp Baker.

- Manage overnight camping use: Float groups often arrive at Camp Baker in the late afternoon to early evening hours at which time the rangers are off-duty. The hosts will be available to provide basic information to these groups including making nightly rounds to all groups reminding them of quiet hours and other additional etiquette.

**Comment 2: The improvements continue the trend in recent years to increase the development footprint in the corridor, which will in turn create new justifications for additional development in the future.**

#### Response

The most recent improvements at Camp Baker over the past few years were recognized as legitimate and justifiable and include the following:

- Installation of the modern, three bedroom staff housing: Prior to the installation of the staff house, the rangers lived and worked within a small, rustic log cabin. The overall living and work space conditions were substandard at best. The main floor of the cabin served as the living area, kitchen and office, as well as the public contact station which it was not suited for. The only heat source was an antique wood burning stove.

The basement of the cabin contained two small bedrooms, sink, toilet, shower and water heater. The floor was bare concrete. The heat source was a few electric baseboard heaters.

The presence of mice and flies were a constant health threat (hantavirus) and nuisance. The water was not potable and the rangers were required to pack in water for drinking and cooking. It had a high iron and sulfur content. The sinks, showers and toilets were always stained bright orange, as would anything else that came into contact with the water including towels, clothing and dishes. There was a constant smell of sulfur emanating throughout the cabin.

The installation of the modern pre-fabricated house was greatly needed and long overdue.

- Installation of the ranger station: Prior to the installation of the pre-built ranger station, the rangers work space was limited to a cramped area within the main floor of the log cabin. There was very limited storage space for office and registration supplies. The lighting was poor and the only heat source was an antique wood burning stove. This small area also served as the contact station for the public.

The modern pre-built ranger station provided the rangers with the proper work space and a much improved contact station for the public.

- Installation of the pole barn garage: Prior to the installation of the pole barn garage, the storage building for rafts, canoes and other river equipment consisted of a small, mouse-ridden wooden shed which was approximately 120 square feet in size (12' x 10'). The small size was inadequate to store all the equipment, so most of the camping supplies were stored on plywood shelving in the basement of the log cabin. The canoes, raft frame and trailer had to be stored outside in the elements. At the end of the season, the rafts, canoes, trailer and most of the camping equipment were hauled back to Great Falls for storage due to lack of secure storage facilities at Camp Baker.

The construction of the modern pole barn garage allows for secure long-term storage of all river equipment as well as tools and grounds keeping equipment. It also serves as a clean and sheltered work shop for conducting repair and maintenance on a variety of equipment, necessary to perform stewardship activities on the river corridor.

**Comment 3: The proposals incur unnecessary capital costs and future costs for operations and maintenance for an agency that regularly points out it already has inadequate funding to do its job.**

**Response**

As noted in the Response to Comment #1, the proposed host pad at Camp Baker was deemed as necessary and prudent for a variety of factors.

Section 10d, page 15 of the EA addressed increased use in energy, which recognized a minor increase in energy use.

Section 10f, page 15 addressed the projected maintenance costs, which recognized an anticipated increase between \$500 to \$1,000 per year. This is an acceptable expense for the operations budget to absorb, considering that the hosts are volunteers and the return in investment is very high.

**Decision:** Based on the Environmental Assessment and content of public comment, it is my decision to approve Alternative B, the proposed action, to improve the existing host pad area and utilities at Camp Baker – Smith River State Park.

This action is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the FWP Director in writing and postmarked within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the Department or participated in the decision making process and how FWP might address the concerns of the appeal.



John Taillie  
Region 4 Parks Manager